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More Environmental Groups Add their Opposition to Destruction of Old-growth Forest in North Hills; Hearing to be held October 23, 2013

East Hills NY 10-18-13 -- The Sierra Club, LI Chapter and the Green Party of Nassau County, along with the President of Long Island Orchestrating for Nature (LION) have added their voices to the opposition to the destruction of a state-recognized old-growth forest in North Hills.

A press conference will be held today adjacent to the forest, also designated the Grace Forest in a 1978 article in the Botanical Gazette of the University of Chicago, and designated a "significant and rare vegetational community type" by state conservation officials in 2005.

Citizens will once again have a chance to challenge the repeated assaults on the 80-acre forest, located near the Long Island Expressway (LIE) and Northern State Parkway, when the Village of North Hills holds a hearing on a proposed 10-building condominium project at the site on Wednesday, October 23, 2013 at 7:30 PM at the Village Hall at One Shelter Rock Road.

The richly forested site, called the "Grace Forest", has been partially destroyed by prior developments there in the past 10 years -- a "Bristol" facility and the "Chatham I and II" residential projects -- despite having been listed as an important ecological resource by the NY state Natural Heritage Project (see <http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/29338.html>)

The Village of North Hills Board will consider whether to allow the builder, Scott Rechler, to add an additional story to some of the already-approved 4-story fortress-like apartment blocks that are envisioned to cover the site.

They will completely level almost the entire forest in a 14 acre tract and destroy its wildlife, according to the developer's own environmental review.

For example, environmental review says:

"The eastern hognose snake is the only reptile species potentially found on the site which is listed as a special concern species. The hognose snake is expected throughout the site in small numbers and will suffer direct loss," Draft Environmental Impact Statement

(DEIS) p 2-55.

and

"The only terrestrial turtle species possibly on the site is the Eastern box turtle. ...Like the snakes this species is likely to suffer direct losses during construction and significant impacts are expected." DEIS p. 2-54.

and

"The proposed project and the recently completed projects will result in the clearing of the majority of woodland vegetation in the vicinity DEIS p. 4-1

East Hills based environmental activist Richard Brummel disclosed Monday that the Long Island chapter of the Sierra Club has decided to assist in challenging the project, which came newly into prominence after about 7 years' delay when surveyor's ribbons were attached last month to about 30 large trees along the LIE Service Road just east of New Hyde Park Road.

The president of Long Island Orchestrating for Nature (LION), a nature and animal welfare organization, John DiLeonardo ((516) 592-3722), added his opposition:

"As an anthrozoologist, I know far too well how destructive man has become toward nature. While urbanization is necessary with our expanding population, old-growth forests are essential for our worsening climate, already endangered habitats, and overall scenic community. Do not clear-cut this forest. It will be a long-term detriment to our Long Island community that cannot be replaced."

Green Party of Nassau County Chair Jim Brown ((516) 608-1446) issued the following statement on behalf of his party's executive committee:

The Green Party of Nassau supports the attempt to save the 20 acres in North Hills. We hope the forest can be saved as open space--there is far too little open space in Nassau County and we should do everything possible to preserve what is left.

Mr. Brummel listed legal and ethical grounds upon which he hoped to challenge the project, in addition to the ecological argument for protecting a rich and unusual old-growth "Oak-Tulip-type" forest located in the heavily developed middle of western Nassau:

-- While the project claims to affect only a small piece of an already-diminished contiguous forest, in fact a large portion of the 17 acres at issue remains in a natural state, and it is integrally connected to an adjacent parcel of about 20 more acres, a fact wholly ignored from the developer's original papers;

-- Parts of the current Environmental Impact Statement are rendered obsolete by the passage of time (8 years) -- including those related to temporary "flooding" a few years prior to the time it was written;

-- The changes in the project are substantial -- and change the project's impact on the community -- and require a new round of environmental review under state law;

-- Vegetation suggests the presence of fresh-water wetlands, regardless of prior findings;

-- Photos of the forest included by the developer in the environmental review were highly deceptive and misrepresented the true character of the forest to the Village Board in 2006;

-- The state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) urged the Village to protect the forest, yet almost no "mitigation" was adopted for the project, and the DEC arguments were not aired at the public hearing on the project;

-- The public hearing on the project in 2006 largely ignored ecological effects and lacked any robust public participation, despite concerns raised by the state DEC and Professor Sarah Meyland of the NY Institute of Technology.

Many of the legal issues would be out-of-date were the project not seeking a new site permit, Mr. Brummel said. But the fact that the project is being re-reviewed by the Village, and the fact so much time has passed since the original environmental review was approved may offer some legal challenges he said.

Aside from the legal questions Mr. Brummel said he hopes to mobilize public support for protecting the forest that could sway either Village officials or the developer, Mr. Rechler, who is not only an aggressive developer of Long Island land but the Vice Chairman of the Port Authority of NY and NJ, appointed by Governor Cuomo.

"Does Andrew Cuomo really want his prominent appointee to be destroying natural resources that his own environmental agency calls for protecting?" Mr. Brummel asked.

"Our planet is in the grips of crises of global warming and ecological distress; we

need to preserve now, not destroy. We need to protect trees and natural open space, especially around western Nassau County. The time to destroy nature has passed, now it's time to let our planet recover," Mr. Brummel said.

Mr. Brummel urged interested citizens to contact him at (516) 669-1741, email him at rbrummel@att.net, visit his website at Planet-in-Peril.org, sign a petition against the project at Change.org (search under "north hills forest"), and to attend the North Hills hearing on October 23.



Trees at the Grace Forest in North Hills, NY.



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